

Symposium on the Byzantine Family and Household

INTRODUCTION

The second part of this volume consists of a selection of papers which were first presented at the Dumbarton Oaks Symposium, "The Byzantine Family and Household," held at Dumbarton Oaks in May 1989. The full program of the Symposium will be found at the end of the volume. As is well known, the study of the Byzantine family and household is still in its infancy, despite the valuable contributions which have been made by scholars in the course of the last few years. The purpose of the Symposium was to address and explore issues which are still being developed. The focus was thematic rather than chronological, as may be seen in the papers published here. The sessions of the first day were dedicated to the general topic of the formation and dissolution of family links, and the variety of factors which affected them: religious, social, demographic, and economic factors were discussed. The family, a powerful unit of social organization and cohesion, was reflected in literature, art, symbolic language, and in man's view of society and authority. The reflection in literature was discussed on the first day, while on the second day the discussion centered around the influence of familial ties on art, as well as on artistic reflections of issues that are connected with marriage and the family. A number of papers focused on the physical structures that surrounded family life (that is, the house), and on the material and symbolic furnishings of the house. Finally, the third day was dedicated to the discussion of institutions, ideas, and forms of behavior which affected family and sexual life, in specifically religious environments.

In order to place the papers that follow in context, some general words about the Byzantine family may be in order. Some of the characteristics of the Byzantine family are more or less established. We know that people married young (a rule of thumb regarding the age of first marriage might be close to notional puberty, that is, between twelve

and fifteen years of age for girls, while for boys it probably was around twenty), and marriage alliances were contracted when children were even younger. This is, perhaps, a Mediterranean pattern, although it remains to be seen whether it was a chronologically stable one. At the time an alliance was made, there was usually an exchange of property: the woman received a dowry from her own family, and was promised an ὑπόβολον (the old *donatio propter nuptias*) from the husband. The family property would then be constituted from the property of the couple which, however, was subject to different legal rules, depending on its provenance. The granting of a dowry affected the economics not only of the new family unit, but of the original one as well.

Secondly, one must distinguish between the biological family and the kin created by artificial links, such as adoption and spiritual parenthood. The distinction is particularly important for demographic purposes, and also for anthropological ones: how a society deals with artificial kinship is highly indicative of its organization and mental constructs. Insofar as the biological family is concerned, questions arise as to its size, and also as to the way it functions as a social and economic unit. Here, too, a distinction must be made between the size and structure of the family and the size and structure of the household. This differentiation, and the discussion surrounding it, have been studied by both demographers and historians. While it is probable that the Byzantine household was a relatively small one, consisting primarily of the nuclear family, the matter remains open to investigation, an investigation which must take into account not only the written record, but also what we learn from archaeological inquiry.

Thirdly, the family and family relations in Byzantium were surrounded with symbolism, which operated at various levels. While such is undoubtedly the case in most societies, it is the particulari-

ties that illuminate the emotive and symbolic world of each individual society. When Constantine Porphyrogenitus advised that the emperor, on inspecting the thematic troops, inquire after the well-being of his “children” (παῖδία μου), that is, his soldiers, and of his “daughters-in-law” (αἱ νύμφαι μου), he was making specific political use of an institution imbued with great real and symbolic

power.¹ The symbolic aspects of family and household in art, ideology, and even in institutions that emulated the family, form a rich field of inquiry.

The papers published in the following pages treat some of these questions, and a number of other aspects of the topic.

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¹ *Constantini Porphyrogeniti imperatoris, De cerimoniis aulae byzantinae libri duo*, Bonn ed., I, 483.